SELECTED WRITINGS

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

There are more meanings to *travesti* than could be conveyed if I attempted an English translation. The word originates from the Spanish verb *travestir/se*, in the same way that *crossdresser* follows from the notion of crossdressing, dressing across from some other position. However, as Berkins explains, her usage of *travesti* reaclaims a word that was once used to insult and shame (and even criminalize their existence) and transforms it into an identity not just outside of the colonial gender binary but in staunch opposition to it. It's a specific identity which is similar in some ways but not at all synonymous to *transgender*. For these reasons I've decided to keep the word travesti in these translated texts.

However, Berkins frequently uses another word, *travestismo*, which I wasn't sure how to work with; she doesn't define it and I couldn't find relevant writings online. A combination of *travesti* and the suffix *ism*; travestismo means, on its surface, the literal act of crossdressing, but in Berkins' usage the word carries a sense of collective action, suggesting the existence of a travesti political movement; travestismo as travesti philosophy, as travesti existence. In most instances, I've translated travestismo as *travesti existence*, *being travesti,* or *travesti life*, but the reader should keep in mind the range of meanings and connotations that Berkins may have had in mind.

Transness:
The Construction/Deconstruction of our identity

Fragments of a document written for Berkin's activist group,
Asociación Lucha por la Identidad Travesti y Transexual
Buenos Aires, Argentina: 1995

According to the genitals with which I was born, the patriarchal system has decided that I must live in a particular way. That my name must be masculine, my personality harsh and insensitive, I must be a protective father and must exercise my privileges as an oppressor. I didn't want to make myself live according to that role, which was decided only because of my genitals and my sex.

Many things make a person and it's not only the circumstantial reality of their genitals. To be transgender is to have the very intimate and profound sense of living in a gender that is different from that which society assigned to their genitals. This isn't about clothes or makeup or the surgeries... it's about ways of feeling, of thinking, of relating with and seeing things.

This gender, one way or another, chosen or self-made, does not necessarily need to be one of the two genders that the patriarchal

system has imposed. I thought my only choice (if I did not want to be a man) was to be a woman. That is, if in order to be a man you have to be masculine, by not taking up those masculine characteristics as my own, I thought my only option was the only other one in existence: to be a woman, feminine. Today I try not to think in a way that is dichotomous or binary. I think it is possible to live with the genitals we have and construct a gender that fits us, being distinct, our own.

We have physical and cultural differences from women. The physical differences create in us unique experiences upon which we can construct our own identities. We, the travestis, have been raised with a tremendous patriarchal burden to be oppressors, to enjoy the privileges of the patriarchy. We have received throughout our lives firm messages of domination and this has made it more difficult for us to choose our gender. *We are traitors to the patriarchy, and that's something that we've had to pay for with our lives many times.*

...[B]ut what I mentioned before about being a woman, being feminine, as the only option, actually means being a woman according to the masculine stereotypes of how a woman should be. In this sense, we share with women the demand for us to have perfect bodies that match that of the masculine imagination, which for us is generally much more difficult. Many of our attempts end in our deaths.

The system comes down on us so hard that travestis wind up being whatever we can rather than what we dreamed of being as girls. Our only option is to be the woman that the system consumes: provocative, sensual, beautiful, sweet...

Now that women are fighting for their place and their rights, the patriarchy fosters in travestis what it searches for. Many of us have accepted that place because within this terrible oppression and denial of the fulfillment of our own desires, it is either we become that or we become nothing.

What's more, people get caught up in the clothes we wear and they struggle to see beyond that where there is a human being. Society focuses on the image, things that are picturesque, flashy, and it struggles to reach a profound need to understand them. This is applauded if you add some comedy, if she is a joke, or responds to the urges of men. But when you give that clothes, that flashy image, a body, a soul, a person with ideas and feelings: total chaos.

In general, the gender I'd like to create for myself is not the feminine gender according to what the system holds, but rather it has to do with the characteristics that are found in women in general. I want a gender whose models (from which I draw the characteristics I choose) are women, the real ones and not those invented by men.

We have a common enemy: the patriarchal system. And it's in that sense that we should unite under the specific forms of oppression we suffer from. I want to fight for abortion rights, for the freedom to choose one's sexual orientation, for the rights of Bolivian women to their land... and not in solidarity but rather as part of my own struggle, because it means a struggle against a common enemy: the system...

...[W]omen (the most harmed due to the construction of the gender they were assigned) as much as the transgender (harmed by the denial of the possibility to choose another gender) should make their objective the deconstruction of the genders imposed by the patriarchal system.

In this sense, the very existence of travestis breaks, in a way, with the determinants of gender and, in some cases, with the genders themselves: that's what we should aim for. Unfortunately, as much with women as with transgender people, this doesn't always occur. In most cases, women as much as transgender people choose to in one way or another defend the gender that was imposed on them. (One for being born a woman, the other for refusing to be

a man).

Travestis suffer under two forms of oppression:

1) Social oppression, based in the collective stereotypes of what a travesti is: mystery, deception, perversion, contagion, etc. The patriarchy punishes us for being traitors, for "betraying" the privileges of domination they give to us based on the genitals we're born with. Women often feel a sense of invasion, that their identity is being usurped. Imposed upon us is every social punishment they can imagine. From rejection to intolerance to not even considering us worthy of life itself.

2) Institutional violence, applied under the guise of safeguarding morals, proper character, family, and religion. This violence is the result of social violence and it is used against us for daring to contravene social rules regarding who we must be and what we must do. Of course the institutional machine that serves as a tool of this system, like with all other cases of subversion against this oppressive and repressive system, is the police.

Sixty four murdered travestis are the result of these two types of violence. Many more suffering, many sick, isolated, alone, surviving and resisting as they can.

Travestis, unlike gays and lesbians, have no choice with regard to our visibility. We cannot choose to not tell our families unless we decide to never see them again, much less the men and women who are our neighbors, and the people with whom we must get along with daily. We cannot choose when to come out of the closet... nor can we ever prepare sufficiently. There we are and we must accept the consequences. Imagine the amount of our need and our desire that it takes to face the consequences of living in an oppressive society such as this one having decided to be who we long to be.

A proposal for my sisters

I propose to my sisters that we search for our own identities

without cramming ourselves in identities pre-constructed by the same system that oppresses us. I believe we can accomplish this when we ourselves unlearn our part as oppressor, constructing our own identity, choosing the characteristics we want from among all the possibilities and not determined by the genders imposed by the patriarchal system.

Why travestis?

I've chosen the word travesti because it is important for us to redefine the term with which they refer to us. This is the word we identity with and which it is necessary for us to reclaim as a defense to our own integrity.

With this word I don't refer to the people who simply wear the clothing of the other sex, but rather to the identity I describe in this document and that in other countries is called *transgender*.

Lohana Berkins
Travesti

Travestida para transgerir.
Interview with Clarisa Palapot
Revista Socialismo o Barbarie
Year 1, No. 3, October 2000.

What is the general situation for the travesti movement?

The accomplishment that I'm most proud of is that many travestis have stopped being passive victims and have become active victims. At the same measure as we've been changing, society has been changing. And it's because we have made ourselves into dangerous subjects. First subjects of conscience, later subjects of the law and petitioning subjects. For example, last year I decided I would finish my secondary education. The director, when I went in the first time, told me there were no vacancies, and this wasn't a school with strict admission or anything like that. My personal milestone was saying: "Look ma'am, rethink your decision because I'll file a lawsuit that you will never be able to forget." That's the change, forcing a whole college to coexist, or at least respect a travesti, and the experience was marvelous. I was chosen as a representative for the school council, I was the most popular girl at the college. Other travestis have been doing it as well. Some girls took over a hotel where they worked and had been badly exploited: those are subjects making demands. They are telling the state: first of all, we won't let ourselves be pushed aside because we have rights. And, second, we want our rights to be respected like any anyone else.

How would you define yourself sexually?

In a society that forces you to identify as a man or a woman, it's more fun to say: I'm a travesti. The ideal thing would be for each of us to be able to create, be, and have the image that we want. The

question I'm asking myself is whether in a society so alienated, so educated, so full of labels it is possible to talk about basic instincts and pure desires. To what point have we structured our desires? Oppression, from the point of view of travestis, has to do with the way that one is only allowed to be a man or a woman in the sex-gender scheme (which implies a biological condition that corresponds to an assigned social role and desire; woman=mother=-housewife). This society becomes slightly more permissive—just slightly—and it says, you can be gay or lesbian. And it's precisely that being travesti breaks that down. Why do I need to choose between two genders, as if those genders were a miracle cure for the world, for the oppressor and the oppressed?

Prostitution and being travesti: what's the relationship between them?

Prostitution continues to be the only option. Travestis can't speak as if prostitution can be chosen. We could talk about choice if we were able to access ordinary jobs. Then yes, I'd choose and perhaps things could be democratic enough that I'd be making a choice to do sex work. But that's not the case with travestis, who have no other alternative. And the most unfortunate result, worse than prostitution, is for us to be unable to conceive of being travestis without prostitution, we're constituted through prostitution, not in favor of prostitution but rather of it.

At first I thought that prostitution was something that depended solely on me, that I was deciding to go and stand on the street corner. One day I came to my senses and realized that prostitution wasn't just a coincidence, something I had fed into and made happen, but that it had to do with a much more perverse condition created by an entire system. Prostitution is caused by poverty and the corruption of the state.

What's the relationship between travestis with sex workers?

The lives of travestis are bound up with the lives of sex workers, there's a parallelism and an intersection of histories, which unfortunately is the history of oppression. We see different sides of the same oppressor. Then women have their own history.

What's your understanding of the patriarchy?

I always say that I'm a Judas twice over. Men feel that travestis are traitors to the patriarchy, because having a penis, that symbol, we have renounced power. The second question comes as a result of rejecting the image of womanhood that this society upholds. What happens to me in life, happens exactly by calling myself Lohana and by bearing the standard of the feminine image. Because if I'd stayed like the class of white gays, with a college degree, things would have been different for me. In every sphere of its problem—the black woman, the lesbian woman, the woman sex worker, the woman who had an abortion, the woman professional—women have a story that is similar to ours.

What happens with the image of the travesti?

I think that when I meet with a client, the ones that don't know me are expecting a stereotype of the travesti, and they encounter something else. I began to break with the stereotype when I began to live the way I wanted. Travestis tell me I look like a lesbian. They're over there with their high heels and I've got nothing. Their way of imagining lesbians is also a problem. We're so stuck in pigeonholes. It's also wearing jeans, before I'd talk to the girls and say: don't go out to the supermarket at ten in the morning dressed like Greta Garbo, be more subtle when you're out and you'll avoid a violent situation. We hide the matter of having a penis, and we call that loading the

dice (tucking). One day I went out to this spot and there was a girl who hadn't tucked. The second time I went was the same. The third time, I told myself: I'm such a dumbass. I relaxed and began to enjoy the freedom she had. I thought that if I couldn't, I would be in a cycle of hypocrisy. Because I knew she had a dick and I have one too.

How does this criticism of social structures get started?

When we began the travesti movement we used to go to the meetings and and lesbians and feminists would put into words everything that we had been thinking about. First I changed my way of seeing the world. And later my vision of myself. I began to look inward, to speak, to put into words what had been an effort all my life. I used to be very misogynistic, until I began a really interesting path which is that of meeting real women. Not the woman of advertisements, who is always divine, but women who live the everyday.

And discrimination?

Travestis are at the intersection of all discriminations: poor, sex workers, illiterate, and attacked. I held a workshop on sexual assault and I froze, because whenever a woman spoke, I thought to myself: that happened to me. But it wasn't any man in particular who did that to me: it had been society. Society isolated me, it diminished me, it made me feel like shit. "You fucking little faggot, we'll lock you up, we'll kill you like a dog and no one will find out."

That framework, that worthlessness, society imposed that on me. This is a bruisingly violent society. What's going on in Argentina is that all the social movements are led by the bourgeoisie, that's why they never arrive at the true revolution, not in the workplace or elsewhere.

You're referring to the left as well?

The left too, yes. To me there's nothing as anti-democratic as the political parties: extremely powerful patriarchal structures where they decide what their subjects want.

What's the alternative?

I think the first thing is to try to keep organizations from turning into structures and to return to the groundwork. It's easy to talk about other people's problems. What's missing here is discussion and the participation of the true social actors. I'll feel like there is participation when Elena Reynaga (president of the Association of Women Sex Workers in Argentina) becomes a Congresswoman and I get to talk with her. When Elena is the one who speaks on sex work, and when the workers are where they need to be.

Do you think capitalism is capable of bringing about that change?

No. I think we need to dismantle those structures. And that's done by building genuine participation by social actors. And the change doesn't take place just because women are in charge: honestly, fuck Graciela Fernández Meijide; fuck Chacho Alvarez' wife too. I think fascism has no gender. If tomorrow a travesti comes along and tells me that she's becoming a cop, I'll vomit on her and that's that; to me she'll have stopped being a travesti. I think power corrupts when there's a structure that can be corrupted, then it doesn't matter if it is men or women there.

Absolute Autonomy Over Our Bodies
Speech given at VIº Seminario Internacional:
Socialismo, experiencias y perspectivas
Sao Paulo, Brazil. 2000.
(Subsequently published in *América Libre,*
the Marxist magazine which organized the conference)

I know a lot of you are asking yourselves what a travesti is doing here. Because many people have it completely wrong or are full of myths about who travestis are. I want to say that I am a feminist too. The first problem that we travestis have is that neither society nor the state recognizes being travesti as our identity. One of the most harmful ideas we have is that of the ecclesiastical authorities. The Church has completely demonized us. For example, they think that if you listen to a travesti, that you will end up becoming travestis. They make us out to be contagious. Let me assure you that you can relax, no one is going to transform just by listening to me.

Another thing is the question of why we can speak of many subjects, and what we most avoid and fear is the body. I quite perfectly love my body. As Lucy Stone said in 1845, "I don't want the right to own property or to vote if I don't have absolute autonomy over my body." That's where our problem starts.

The reality in Latin America is that travesti identity emerges between 8 and 10 years of age. The first thing that happens is expulsion from the family; and, as a result, expulsion from society follows. This society is still not prepared to provide some kind of defense.

In the Republic of Argentina there are three travesti organizations, and we work directly with a population of 3000 travesti comrades. The age of death for travestis in Argentina and in almost all of Latin America is no higher than 30 years.* The causes of death are: death by police, without any government investigating anything. Another cause is the indiscriminate use of surgeries. The

capitalist system has created a single model of the woman: cute, sweet, very beautiful, which is what the patriarchy consumes. And so we, when we begin to live our truth, since the only option for survival that remains is prostitution, if I were to stop, the most I'd get would be spare change, because I weigh 92 kilos. So strong is the idea of that image, that our comrades end up becoming victims of this situation. Because what our society says is, "It's okay, this boy doesn't want to be a man, let him be a woman. But not just any woman. Rather, a fine-looking woman," like the most famous travesti from Brazil, Roberta Close. "Like Roberta Close, or nothing." These are the models imposed on us. In this way extremely violent situations are brought about. The fact that we are condemned to prostitution also threatens our very self-esteem.

I suffered seven years of incarceration for the mere act of having defied this society, and said "this is who I am." In Argentina, we started to organize ourselves over 9 years ago. The most profound change came about through getting to know feminism, the lesbian feminists. Then we began to fight, and we have a program called "Building Travesti Citizenship." Obviously, the word "citizenship" isn't that of liberalism, but rather has a broader and more revolutionary meaning.

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* Editor: I've done some research into Berkins' claims about trans/travesti life expectancy, but haven't been able to find any research that looked into this issue specifically. Berkins gave this speech years before a 2005 study she led which surveyed hundreds of travesti sex workers in Argentina, but even that work only provided enough data to estimate that the deceased travestis known to the travestis she interviewed—mostly street sex workers in Buenos Aires caught up in an HIV/AIDS epidemic—had mostly died between the ages of 22 and 41. Which doesn't speak to the population of travesti who might have been stealth or otherwise outside their networks, and potentilly living longer. But this is Berkins speaking as an activist from what she witnessed first hand.

We outline four things: education, health, housing, and work. In Argentina powerful laws are still in force which punish being travesti. So you'll understand what I'm talking about, I am absolutely proud of being travesti, and if I were born again I would choose exactly the same thing. But this society imposes the binary business of men and women. When you're born, the midwife looks between your legs and says: "that's a penis" or "that's a vagina." To that genital arrangement is affixed a sex and to sex a gender. And as another speaker said, it isn't the same for men and women, especially not in a society as patriarchal and machista as Latin American society. As a result, if you don't act in accordance with your genitals, you've got to act within the other option which is as a woman. What we're putting forward is that we are neither men nor women. I am a travesti, a person with certain genitals who can live perfectly put together under another identity or another gender, which is feminine one. For now there aren't many examples. Later on, after another 2000 years of struggle, we'll be able to say: "women, men, travestis... and an endless list" when referring to gender.

We've started to attack the bourgeoisie hypocrisy. Because out in the world, those pure pious men, when they see us prostituting ourselves they call us "sinners," and if we demand our rights they call us "communists." So we've started attacking the bourgeoisie, the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie. Because if there are 10,000 of us travestis standing on the streets every night, it's because there are 10,000 men that consume them. At night, all is well; but in the daytime they say, "Kill them, lock them up, they're the devil." That is hypocrisy. Society demands punishment for those who prostitute themselves, but not for their customers.

We've started to fight. In Buenos Aires, the state spends 300 million dollars to sustain the police, which is the same repressive police of that process, and refuses to spend even ten dollars on our education, on getting us training, on seeing us as subjects under the law.

Within all of these issues, we can also be socialists, and we can be feminists. It's not that the only thing I am is travesti. When I spoke of the question of the "myth", that people think we're licentious, that we spend all day in bed like a goddess Venus, smoking cigarettes, taking it easy, and that the world around us doesn't matter at all. That's another stereotype. In our community everything can be found, there are girls who are that type, there are blonde girls, those of us who weigh 92 kilos, fellow communists, there's a diversity. And we have that diversity because we're people. I'll say that travestis are something strange when we shit out of our ears or pee from our noses. As long as those things happen through their intended places, I don't see what there is to be surprised about.

That's where this society starts to go a bit crazy. Because the mere fact of our existence doesn't bother them. Moving through the world, I'm just another chubby lady, and all is well. The problem starts when we begin to ask for our rights. When we say, "stop killing our sisters, give us work, education, housing, health care. That's when people freak out.

It makes it incredibly difficult for us. Someday I'd like that in some big event, there be lesbian, gay, and travesti comrades participating without facing discrimination from within the movements in the struggle. Because it turns out that some fights appear much more important than others. If it's about victims, we have victims. If it's about prison, we know about prisons. If it's about repression, we face repression. So I don't see why we can't think in a cumulative way, and demand all of our rights.

Why is it, if I go to a march against the IMF, against yankee imperialism, why can't you show up to our fights too? So we've got to talk about these issues as everyday things, because travestis are everyday too. We live as part of communities, we live in houses, we have families, guy friends, women friends, we think. Then the reflection we need to share is that we are committed to changing this society. I am absolutely against imperialism, I love freedom. But

not a conditional freedom. I love absolute freedom, that everyone should live as they choose. I absolutely love being travesti. Why would it seem like something from another world?

So the demand we're making is to build a society without any kind of oppression, though it may seem tedious to speak of "las" and "los". We speak of "los revolucionarios", but where are the women revolutionaries (las revolucionarias)? They were there.

We need to break the routine around gender. That a man must be a super macho who shouts and hits others, and that the woman cooks and goes here and there with her baby. There are women revolutionaries who have taken up a rifle. And there are men who can cook and are no less revolutionaries.

Another issue is that of affection and the body. Why is it we can speak, and if in this moment I said "let's take up arms" it would spark a fire in everyone, but if I said, "let's take off our clothes, let's get in touch with our own bodies," there would be a complete panic? Why do I need to feel shame about my body, if the most precious thing of all is the body? The body is for life, the body carries out the fight, the body is used for everything. It's the most essential thing we have.

I insist on the question of our struggles. I believe we need to re-think it completely and be inclusive. I'm also struggling for people without land, I am absolutely devastated by poverty, I fight against the rich, I fight against every kind of oppression. What I want to leave for you to reflect on is that you should join us in our struggle. That's all.

Travestis: A Political Identity
Paper presented in the Contemporary Sexualities Panel
VIII Jornadas Nacionales de Historia de las Mujeres
III Congreso Iberoamericano de Estudios
de Género Diferencia-Desigualdad
Córdoba, Argentina. 2006.

How we talk about ourselves: travestis in Latin Amrica

On this occasion I'll be referring to the living conditions, political mobilization, and demands of Latin American travestis[1] with a special emphasis on the situation in Argentina.

I'd like for my words to contribute to the construction of the memory of Latin American travesti life. I think that travestis have a story to tell and to make. That is, first person experiences to counter the discourse about us that circulates.

Since the last decade of the 20th century, travesti life has caught the attention of public opinion in Latin America. I'm referring to the fact that travesti existence has entered the public sphere in the hands of biomedical, police, sociological, juridical, political and journalistic discourses that functioned as triggers to conversation on some occasions and in other instances to reinforce the unfair dynamics related to gender identity, sexuality, race, social class, ethnicity, religion, age, and ideology in different contexts. In such a way that when we think of Latin American travestis we think of a

1. Due to constraints of length, I won't be speaking here of our transsexual friends, who are affected in large part by the exclusionary dynamics that also affect travestis and with whom we coincide with in numerous claims. However, the legal and social situation, and the struggles of transsexuals present specific issues that can't be subsumed under those of travestis.

complex and changing phenomenon and we refer to subjects intersected by relations to privilege and oppression like in every society and every historical moment.

Doctors and psychologists have defined travestis as women who dress in clothes corresponding to women. We resist that definition which takes no heed of the way we think nor the way we actually live.

In the decade of 1990, when travestis began to raise our voices in public and organize ourselves we decided that one of the first issues we needed to concentrate our collective efforts on was to resignify the term "travesti", which until that moment had negative connotations for them and for ourselves. The term "travesti" has been and still is used as a synonym for AIDS carrier, thief, scandalous, infected, and marginal. We decided to give new meanings to the word travesti and connect it to the struggle, resistance, dignity, and happiness.

In that way travestis struggled to articulate the political dimensions of the word travesti, which signifies certain subjects, us, who confront in various moments and spaces certain adversaries, fundamentalists, authoritarians, those who exploit, and the defenders of patriarchy and heteronormativity. Since our understanding of travesti identity challenges the notion of identities as limits, my reflections here don't attempt to invalidate other subjective experiences and relations, other alternative ways of living and understanding being travesti.

Travestis are people who construct our identities by questioning the meanings that the dominant culture imposes on our genitals. Society takes readings of people's genitals and from those observations follow expectations about identity, about abilities, the social position, the sexuality and morality of every single person. It's believed that a body with a penis will follow a masculine subjectivity and a body with a vagina will follow a feminine subjectivity. Being travesti breaks with this binary logic of the Western societies

which is hegemonic and which oppresses those who resist being subsumed into the categories of man and woman.

Of course, travestis are subject to contradictions, paradoxes and tensions, just like everyone else in society. Such that, though some of our practices contribute to destabilizing the binary logic of sex-gender, by constructing ourselves out of femininity we frequently resort to the values and cultural symbols that recreate the subordination of women and femininity.

Nevertheless, let's discuss the argument made by some feminists that look down on travestis in claiming that we reproduce stereotypes about women and reinforce traditional femininity. First of all, if it's true that the construction of travesti subjectivities and corporalities resort to norms and emblems bound to hegemonic femininity (because none of us live in a vacuum!), through this process, those rules and attributes are resignified and destabilized (Butler, 1990). Secondly, consider that there are no subjects who are obligated to carry upon their shoulders the inescapable burden of subverting gender norms. We believe this is a political struggle that is chosen and that many travestis now find ourselves launching this fight out of feminist convictions.

The destabilization of the opposition and complementarity between the masculine and the feminine and the historical ties constructed between biology and subjectivity carried out by travestis' struggle to be recognized as human is punished on a daily basis. I consider that an analysis of travesti existence must necessarily take into account the criminalization of travesti identity and the consequences of this criminalization on our everyday lives and on the subjectivities of my fellow travestis.

On one hand, the state is the main antagonist against the rights of travestis, due to its actions and inactions. On the other hand, this social devaluation expresses itself through insults and stereotypes, which systematically reduce travestis to a supposed masculine biological origin and refute the chance of us existing on our own terms.

We maintain our travesti identity not just drawing on linguistic regionalism, but also circumstances and characteristics that make being travesti a different phenomenon from American and European transgender identity.

In the first place, travestis live in different circumstances with respect to those of us who come across transgender people from other countries, who frequently turn to sex reassignment surgeries and have as an objective to reconfigure themselves into the binary logic of male and female. A large amount of Latin American travestis assert the option to occupy a space outside of the binary movement and it's our objective to destabilize the categories of male and female.

Second, the word transgender originated from theoretical work carried out within the structure of the American academy. In contrast, as I mentioned previously, the term travesti in Latin America comes to us from medicine and has been appropriated, reworked, and fleshed out by travestis to call themselves by that word. This is the term in which we recognize ourselves and which we choose to use to establish ourselves as subjects under the law.

This process of reappropriating the position of travestis as a site from which to raise our voices and put forward new demands constitutes a political struggle. This development, which included moments of tension with the academy and with other social and political movements, allowed us to propose alternative understandings of being travesti as an embodied identity that transcends the politics of binary corporality and the logic of the gender-sex dichotomy.

Here, in Latin America, being travesti was constructed as our own space through political mobilization and through discussion with other oppressed groups. We recognize ourselves outside of whatever theoretical discipline which presumes to define us with-

out recognizing our agency and our power as subjects within the frame of the social conditioning that has affected us historically.

To continue developing the contrasts I find between the experiences of transgender people in other regions and the particularities of travesti life in Latin America, I'd like to point out some unavoidable issues towards a contextualized understanding of the cultural and political resources travestis in this region rely on.

As Josefina Fernández (2004: 198) points out, it's not possible to divide the construction of identity from the living conditions of travestis in our societies. These living conditions are marked by the exclusion of travestis from the formal education system and the job market. In this kind of scenario, prostitution constitutes the only source of income, the survival strategy most widely taken up and one of the very scarce spaces where the identities of travestis are recognized as a way of being in the world.

In an study conducted in 2005, during the course of which we consulted with 302 travesti residents of the city of Buenos Aires, the Greater Buenos Aires area, and the city of Mar de Plata, we found that "the practice of street prostitution is the most important source of income for 79.1% of respondents." Those who reported other employment also found themselves in the informal marketplace, without any recognition of their labor rights, in jobs with low qualifications and pay" (Gutiérrez, 2005: 78)

The association between travestis and prostitution constitutes one of the representations of common sense most pervasive in Latin America and Argentine society in particular. In certain social discourses, prostitution appears as a choice made by individual travestis. However, the exclusion from the job market which affects travestis and transsexuals prevents us from framing the matter in terms of free choice.

One of the necessary elements for understanding the recourse to prostitution as nearly the sole form of escape to ensure survival is the expulsion of travestis from the education system. The hostile

circumstances that mark the educational experience of the majority of child and adolescent travestis severely determine the possibilities of these subjects in terms of social inclusion and access to good jobs in adulthood.

The aforementioned study referred to schools as an expulsionary space for travestis: "the majority of travestis/transsexuals suffer some form of violence (91.4% of those surveyed), schools come in at third place—after police custody and the streets—in a list of places in which they have experienced physical violence" (Hiller, 2005: 98).

Another issue which deserves to be analyzed is that in Latin America and in our country, travesti identity is taken up at a young age. This situation, in the context of a society that criminalizes being travesti, very frequently entails the loss of home, of family ties, and alienation from school. As a result young travestis see their childhood interrupted and find themselves forced to live in a world of adults and adults with whom they must negotiate the terms of their survival in various ways (I'm referring here as much to coexistence with adult travestis as their relationships with clients).

In the journeys through life of many travestis we frequently find that recognition of themselves as travestis often involved the experience of alienation. Young and adolescent travestis find themselves forced to leave their towns, their cities, their provinces, and in many cases their countries with the goal of finding less hostile surroundings, the anonymity of a big city that allows them to strengthen their identity, and other social connections that recognize them as well as a market for prostitution which is more lucrative than that of their town or city of origin.

In addition, in the big cities travestis find more opportunities and resources to modify their bodies, though generally in risky and illegal contexts. According to data from the study we conducted in 2005 "87.7% of the total number of respondents had modified their body. Among them, 82.2% had injected silicone, 66.3% used

hormone treatments, and 31.8% had implanted prosthetics. The majority had undergone more than one modification (Gutiérrez, 2005: 80).

In regards to the environments where these interventions on the body took place, the most significant information is that of the situation of vulnerability. "97.7% of those who injected silicone and 92.9% who underwent hormone treatments said those interventions had taken place in a private dwelling. In the case of breast implants, 35.7% had gone to a doctor's office for the procedure and 59.5% to a private clinic. In these cases, very frequently, there did not exist an adequate sterile environment, nor follow up care, and no form of receipt was given for the payment.

Among the circumstances that speak so much to the political and social context as well as the common places we Latin American travestis travel, I'd like to refer specifically to the experience of death. In particular, to the loss of friends and acquaintances repeated a thousand and one times. In Berkins and Fernández (2005: 12), it's mentioned that in a study that interviewed 302 travestis that the names of 420 travestis who had died in the previous five years were uncovered. Approximately 70% of those travestis had died between the ages of 22 and 41.

This information helps us to understand two issues. The first is that, in contrast to privileged groups, for travestis death is nothing extraordinary but rather is an ordinary experience. The second is that the expectation travestis have of only being able to live few years (a perspective that tracks well with reality, to be sure). It happens that we're missing generations of travestis over thirty years old and that young travestis don't know any older travestis who could help them glimpse a moment beyond the immediate present and a fuller scope that transcends individuality.

The massive loss of fellow travestis has a role in the lack of a collective narrative, of a communal memory that could allow us to project ourselves into the future, affecting us each and everyone at

once.

On coexistence laws, police edicts, infraction laws and the public space (for some and only few)

To wrap up, I'd like to focus on an additional aspect of the criminalization of travesti identity that has been the motive for political conflicts in Argentina in recent years. I'm referring to the control of certain populations, among them travestis, which the state effects through the use of police edicts, coexistence laws, infraction laws, and all those extra-constitutional laws that serve the police persecution of specific social groups. Through these regulations the state restricts access to public spaces to various social groups—travestis and women in situations of prostitution, cartonero/as (the poor who collect recycling), protesters, and street vendors.

In this way, our presence and circulation through public spaces is restricted, and in the case of travestis, this exclusion from the public is especially grave since the street is one of the few resources we can rely on as a collective. We haven't had access to education, nor to the job market or to proper housing, in such a way that the zone of the street is extremely relevant to our daily lives.

There's an aspect to the goal of expelling certain subjects from the public space that hasn't been discussed very much and which I'd like to mention. It's the role of the street as the site of the formation of identities. It's in this sphere that we learn to be and where we develop as travestis, women in prostitution, as cartonero/as, as protesters, and street vendors. The street is also the terrain in which we become linked to one another, forge our alliances, and mobilize politically.

Behind all the the tensions that our presence causes in the space of the city there is a debate underway as to who are the legitimate inhabitants of the public space. I consider that behind the permanent struggles of regular practices which take place in the public

space—such is the case as much for prostitution as for street vending and political protests—what we find is a process where the moral values of some social groups are imposed upon the entire society. This universalization of specific points of view constitutes an authoritarian practice we resist and will continue to resist.

Travestis do not intend to impose our values and perspectives but rather we demand the freedom and the material conditions to live lives that are fulfilling and within our full rights. To be citizens we need to enjoy the same freedoms regarding the public space as those enjoyed by people who are considered respectable.

Because our desire is not to achieve respectability, but rather to demolish the hierarchies that arrange identities and subjects, rendering us dark-skinned, whores, Palestinians, revolutionaries, indigenous people, fat people, addicts, exhibitionists, protesters, slum dwellers, lesbians, women, and travestis, who though we lack the ability to give birth to our own kids we do have the courage necessary to conceive a new story.

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And now: The future
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Buenos Aires. November 2012.

There are developments we're living through that scare even us: changes that seemed so far away they weren't even part of our utopias and they can be explained on two fronts: by the very tough fight that the travesti, transsexual and transgender movement has made in defense of our human rights and, on the other hand, by the juncture where politics stands out as an element that transforms the State and everyday life. Though we were always fully capable at the hour of breaking barriers between us and the rest of society, there are still many people who don't understand our issues. I'm referring to small things that sum up the impact of the Ley de Identidad de Género.* For example, when I'd go to the supermarket, each time I bought something with my debit card they asked for my identification. Obviously, when the cashier would see it they'd find a photo that did not coincide with the one in front of them. There's no need to spell out the stares, the ridicule, the mocking. Today, I go to the supermarket and when I start to pull out my ID, if they happen to tell me "there's no need," I take it out anyway. Another example: I have a lot of friends that change their ID and then post that little picture on Facebook. They tag me on the picture
and a ton of other people: They want to show it to the whole world! It's not trivial!

The situation with which we are faced now is that we're starting to contemplate a future, to organize a life. We have to pose ques-

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* Editor: Berkins is referring to the national Gender Identity Law which (among other changes) in 2012 gave trans people in Argentina the right, under the national civil code, to change the name and gender on their identity documents

tions to ourselves about how we're going to work to have greater access to education and that other fundamental theme: employment. The very perverse association of being condemned forever to prostitution begins to be broken. Though insufficient, the State has been giving some answers. The recognition of our identity generates more concrete opportunities. To paraphrase Michelle Bachelet: when a travesti gains access to the State, her life is changed. But when many travestis gain access, that changes the lives of the whole world. We, with our presence, speak to them. And now we can show just what we're capable of.

I remember the first time I went to ask for work: they asked me what I knew how to do and I couldn't answer. I froze. Because we're made to internalize a message that we're good for nothing. And that, I think, is starting to crumble. Presence in everyday life is going to be the only way to tear down old prejudices. With interactions in different public spaces and in workplaces, the stories of others will begin to intertwine with ours. They're going to discover that there aren't so many differences between us, only that the opportunities that others have always enjoyed have always been prohibited for us. In this way new paradigms and feelings toward being travesti will be generated. And that's not all, new subjectivities are made: today a travesti girl has more role models from which to choose. (She can imagine other possibilities: she can, for example, dream of being a news presenter on TV.)

The State, for its part, will be forced to confront itself. It will have to change its sexist paperwork; for example, by removing certain questions and adding more boxes to check off. Travestis in public employment are still the exception. Another tremendous challenge will be that of private employment. Business owners will also have to start providing answers. The famous brands, which ridicule us in their advertisements, will have to figure out what to do when we stand before them. Then we'll find out if they place us behind their counters or on their administrative staff. Another

debate that will also occur is that of social programs, how they'll address things when we have illness associated with the idea of our travesti body.

Finally, trans men are another question. They are still made invisible. Trans masculine activism is still very weak. They will have to build their agenda and we will also come out and put our bodies behind their demands.

To depathologize is not to run out of the hospital
Published in the newspaper *Página/12*
Buenos Aires. October 2013.

Not everything is a matter of law, but the law tells us in Article Nº 12 of the Ley 26.743 de IdG: " The gender identity a person adopts should be respected, especially for women, children, and adolescents." The demand for the depathologization of transsexuality has nothing to do with the negation of medical assistance nor the negligence of any person on the part of science and health institutions.

Pathologization makes the identities of trans people and travestis into a question of sickness. It generates a discourse of moral panic and social panic over our sexuality, our subjectivity and identity. Why? Because medicine obeys and serves a much broader apparatus of disciplinary control. Its objective is to further control those who according to the medical and biological-essentialist gaze deviate from the norm. Medicine constructs this idea of monstrousness, but it also always intervenes as a normalization of the binary in the sense that it only recognizes sexuality and standardization as the origin and destiny of, on one hand, men, and on the other, women. It combines devaluation with insanity, and in the same move it infantilizes us. We come to be pupils under the guardianship of androcentrism and medical discourse—with its harsh misogynist gaze that it uses as a form of domination—so that we're unable to make decisions for ourselves.

When the state does not want responsibility over certain subjects, it controls them, on one side, through repression, with the crossed arms of the police forces, and on the other side, through scientific knowledge. This knowledge which groups together the mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts, sex workers, and trans people. It's shocking how this toxic discourse is still around, now that at

this point it's been shown that being travesti has nothing to do with deviation, perversion, or an attempt against the future of humanity.

What the Gender Identity Law accomplished in this country was to separate one's identity from their relation to their genital configuration and from the obligatory surgical modification. Medicine finds itself before the challenge of recognizing the demands of recognizing the construction of identity as a human right, and in addition respecting the very personal right of trans and travesti people to access the health system and remain within it also as a human right. When we talk about our access to health care, even today we hear the reactionary reply: "A sex change? While so many people are in the hospital waiting for an operation!" It's not surprising that the only part of the Gender Identity Law in Argentina that's yet to be established is the part concerning health care

To depathologize is not to run out of the hospital. Our demands of course will not make the public health system collapse. Nor will it even require a new budget, the professionals capable of treating us are already working in every hospital in Argentina. The steps that are missing are those around education, not in professional matters, because the quality of our doctors is very high, but rather in understanding these demands for healthcare as a comprehensive issue. It's necessary to dismantle the stereotypical image that exists around us that our medical issues are cosmetic, that we turn to the medical system out of vanity. And to begin to think on the construction of identity as a fundamental theme. In many cases facial hair removal can be equally as important or more so than obtaining an ID. Each person arrives at the development of their full self in their own way.

So the image of what is trans healthcare has always followed two paths. One is to treat us as if we are sick or incapable of looking after ourselves. The other is to trivialize the issue, saying that in questions of public health priorities should be put into place. But who is to set those priorities? The task today is to disabuse medical

professionals of the concept of normalcy, and to dismantle the perverse system through which medicine has always made us out to be insects in jars, total anomalies, otherness, the most extraordinary of circus freaks.

Final Message / Ultimo mensaje
Hospital Italiano de Buenos Aires
February 4, 2016, the day before she passed away

Dear friends, my health is in critical condition and will not allow me to meet with you again in person. And so I want to thank you for showing your love and send word out to you through my friend Marlene Wayar, to whom I leave this message. Many are the triumphs that we achieved these past years. Now is the time to resist, to fight for their continuation. The time for revolution is now, because we will never again return to jail. I'm convinced that the engine for change is love. The love we were denied is what drives us to change the world. All the blows and the contempt that I suffered don't compare to the infinite love that surrounds me at this time. Travesti fury forever. Sending you an embrace.